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UNDERSTANDING REFLECTIVE TEACHING

AN INITIAL DISTINCTION: REFLECTIVE TEACHING AND TECHNICAL TEACHING

- What distinguishes reflective teaching from nonreflective teaching?
- Is there such a thing as a nonreflective teacher?
- If you reflect about your teaching will this necessarily make your teaching better?
- Can reflective teaching be bad teaching?

For many, the term *reflective teaching* sounds redundant. It raises the following questions: In order to teach don't you have to think about your teaching? And isn't such thinking the same thing as reflecting on your teaching? These questions get right to the heart of the matter. In what follows, we argue that not all thinking about teaching constitutes reflective teaching. If a teacher never questions the goals and the values that guide his or her work, the context in which he or she teaches, or never examines his or her assumptions, then it is our belief that this individual is not engaged in reflective teaching. This view is based on a distinction between teaching that is reflective and teaching that is technically focused. In order to make the most of this initial distinction, we first describe a teaching situation and then offer two accounts of the teacher's thoughts about her situation. We begin with a description of her situation.

A Student Teaching Incident

Rachel, a White prospective teacher in her early 30s, has been student teaching for 8 weeks in a fourth-grade urban classroom that serves an economically and racially diverse population. For the past few weeks, she and her cooperating teacher have been having a problem with six children (five of whom are children of color from low-income families) who cannot seem to remain engaged in academic activity during the daily 40-minute free-choice period. At times, these students sit and do nothing, whereas at other times they get into arguments with each other and other students, disrupting the rest of the class. Rachel's cooperating teacher, Sue, had long felt that for a part of the school day students should have the opportunity to choose their own activities. Although Sue was not really questioning the value of her approach, she was becoming increasingly frustrated with the students and her own inability to address the situation. Both Sue and Rachel wanted to figure out a way to help these children make more productive use of their time. And both were concerned about the "rough" language used by some of these students when they argued with each other. Sue and Rachel left school that Friday with a sense that a "solution" had to be found. Sue asked Rachel to think about the situation over the weekend and to come back on Monday with some thoughts and suggestions. Sue would do the same.

Teacher as Technician

Initially, Rachel tried to figure out how she could deal with the student disruptions and off-task behavior. She focused on devising ways to present those students with more specific consequences for not complying with the teacher's directions. Rachel remembered the Assertive Discipline Program that she had heard about in one of her university methods courses and thought that she would give this program a try to see if it would lead to an improvement in these students' behaviors. She sensed that her students just didn't understand or feel the consequences for their behavior and that something like the assertive discipline approach might create a framework for sanctions and consequences that would be connected to the students' behavior. Although she didn't want to be the "bad guy" in the classroom she felt that if she didn't demand, sanction, and punish inappropriate behavior the entire class would soon be out of control. She felt that if she and Sue were going to be successful they needed to "get tough."

Teacher as Reflective Practitioner

During a discussion of this situation in her weekly Friday afternoon student teaching seminar, Rachel began to see the "problem" somewhat differently. It was odd she thought, that she had never considered the implications of the

fact that all but one of the children that she and Sue had defined as disruptive were "minority" students and from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Their classroom was very mixed both racially and socioeconomically. Although Rachel was still concerned about developing strategies for helping the six students make better use of their free study time and to decrease the amount of arguing among the students, she also began to ask herself questions about the appropriateness of the classroom's structure in relation to the diverse cultural backgrounds of her pupils. She remembered reading an article by Delpit (1986) in which the author said that not all children benefited from a "liberal" child-oriented, progressive approach to reading instruction and that teachers who taught children of color needed to find ways to make a process approach "fit" and work for all students. Rachel wanted to keep the child-oriented focus of the free-time activity, but thought that she needed to provide a bit more structure so as to facilitate these students' choices. Rachel started to design a classroom intervention for her six students that involved closer planning for and monitoring of the students' activities during the independent study time.

Commentary

In the first teacher-as-technician vignette, Rachel locates the problem entirely in the students and their actions and looks for a program or technique to fix the deviant behavior of her six students. Although Rachel is certainly thinking about the classroom, her thoughts operate from a number of fixed assumptions, assumptions that she does not question. She assumes the problem lies "with the students." She doesn't attempt to examine the context of the classroom or how the students' backgrounds might interact with this context. She also does not seriously question the goals or values embedded in her chosen solution. As a result of this examination, Rachel does not alter the structure of the activity for students but only tries to alter student behavior.

In the second case, Rachel begins to examine her own motivations and the context in which the problem occurs. She then designs an intervention for the specific situation at hand, one that does not locate the problem entirely with the students. Rather than sticking with a number of fixed assumptions, Rachel questions the child-centered approach and what this means in her student teaching situation. In this second instance, Rachel restructures the amount of freedom that students are given during free study period and hopes that this restructuring of the activity will lead to improved student learning and behavior.

When Rachel operated within the technician mode, she accepted the problem as given and tried to solve it. When she was thinking in this mode, the students who misbehaved were seen as the problem. But when Rachel

approached the setting as a reflective practitioner, she looked for distinct ways to pose the problem and attempted to get a different purchase on the students and the issues involved. She also questioned her own beliefs and orientations. In what follows, we maintain that the technical approach to thinking about teaching is inadequate. It is a very limited and ultimately, we feel, an ineffectual way to solve educational problems. Although there certainly are many distinct ways to approach reflective teaching, in our view, the teacher as technician is not one of them.

ON REFLECTIVE TEACHING

- Has/did your own teacher education program prepare(d) you to be the kind of teacher who questions the educational goals and the classroom and school contexts and who plays an active role in creating and critiquing curriculum and who considers a variety of instructional strategies?
- When you think about a classroom problem, do you try to see it from different "angles"?
- Do you think that teachers should play leadership roles in curriculum development, program development, and school reform or just stick to their work in the classroom?

During the last decade, the slogan of reflective teaching has been embraced by teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers all over the world. This international movement in teaching and teacher education that has developed under the banner of reflection can be seen as a reaction against the view of teachers as technicians who narrowly construe the nature of the problems confronting them and merely carry out what others, removed from the classroom, want them to do. The move toward seeing teachers as reflective practitioners is also a rejection of top-down forms of educational reform that involve teachers only as conduits for implementing programs and ideas formulated elsewhere. Proponents of reflective teaching maintain that for much too long, "teachers [have been] considered to be consumers of curriculum knowledge, but are not assumed to have the requisite skills to create or critique that knowledge" (Paris, 1993, p.149). Viewing teachers as reflective practitioners assumes that teachers can both pose and solve problems related to their educational practice. Daily, hourly, even minute by minute, teachers attempt to solve problems that arise in the classroom. The way in which they solve those problems is affected by how

they pose or "frame" the problem. Reflective teachers think both about how they frame and then how to solve the problem at hand.

On the surface, the reflective practice movement involves a recognition that teachers should be active in formulating the purposes and ends of their work, that they examine their own values and assumptions, and that they need to play leadership roles in curriculum development and school reform. Reflection also signifies a recognition that the generation of new knowledge about teaching is not the exclusive property of colleges, universities, and research and development centers. It is a recognition that teachers have ideas, beliefs, and theories too, that can contribute to the betterment of teaching for all teachers.

But even today, with all of the talk about teacher empowerment through teacher reflection, we still see a general lack of respect for the craft knowledge of teachers in the educational research establishment. This establishment has attempted to define a so-called "knowledge base" for teaching that excludes the voices and insights of teachers themselves. As Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1990) said:

The voices of teachers, the questions and problems they pose, the frameworks they use to interpret and improve their practice, and the ways they define and understand their work lives are absent from the literature of research on teaching. (p. 83)

This void must be filled with teachers' voices. Lytle and Cochran-Smith argued, and we agree, that because of teachers' direct involvement in the classroom, they bring a perspective to understanding the complexities of teaching that cannot be matched by external researchers, no matter what methods of study they employ. Although the perspectives of external researchers are helpful in offering a view of schools that cannot be provided by those who work in them on a daily basis and therefore take many things for granted, it is time for the educational research community to recognize and take into account, the issues, and the knowledge of teachers and others who work in schools.

In addition to the invisibility of teacher-generated knowledge in what counts as educational research, many staff development and school improvement initiatives still ignore the knowledge and expertise of teachers and rely primarily on top-down models of school reform that try to get teachers to comply with some externally generated and allegedly research-based solution to school problems. The selling of educational solutions and gimmicks, what some have referred to as "snake oil" staff development, is still big business today. Despite all that the educational reform literature has

told us about the futility of reform efforts that treat teachers as mere conduits of others' ideas, the business still thrives.

What these models of research and staff development seem to have in common is a bureaucratic view of teaching, one that views the key to educational improvement as being "the correct definition of procedures for teachers to follow rather than the development of teachers' capacities to make complex judgments based on deep understandings of students and subjects" (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 5). In contrast to this bureaucratic view, an understanding of the teacher as a reflective practitioner acknowledges the wealth of expertise that resides in the practices of teachers, what Schon (1983) called *knowledge-in-action*. From the perspective of the individual teacher, this means that the process of understanding and improving one's own teaching must start from reflection on one's own experience and that the sort of "wisdom" derived entirely from the experience or research of others is impoverished.

Reflection as a slogan for educational reform also signifies a recognition that the process of learning to teach continues throughout a teacher's entire career, a recognition that no matter how good a teacher education program is, at best, it can only prepare teachers to begin teaching. When embracing the concept of reflective teaching, there is often a commitment by teachers to internalize the disposition and skills to study their teaching and become better at teaching over time, a commitment to take responsibility for their own professional development. This assumption of responsibility is a central feature of the idea of the reflective teacher.

Initially, then, our understanding of reflective teaching emphasizes five key features, features that we develop further throughout this text. A reflective teacher:

- examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice;
- is aware of and questions the assumptions and values he or she brings to teaching;
- is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which he or she teaches;
- takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change efforts; and
- takes responsibility for his or her own professional development.

Although we think these are integral features of what it means to be a reflective teacher, not everyone agrees with us nor do all understand the implications of this view.

THE BANDWAGON OF REFLECTIVE TEACHING

Amidst the explosion of interest in the idea of teachers as reflective practitioners, there has been a great deal of confusion about what is meant in particular instances by the use of the term reflective teaching and whether or not the idea of teachers as reflective practitioners should be supported. Although those who have embraced the slogan of reflective teaching appear to share certain goals about the active role of teachers in school reform and in determining the nature of their own work in the classroom, in reality one cannot tell very much about an approach to teaching from an expressed commitment to the idea of teachers as reflective practitioners alone. Underlying the apparent similarity among those who have embraced the concept of reflective teaching are vast differences in perspectives about teaching, learning, schooling, and the social order. In fact, it has come to the point now where the whole range of beliefs about these issues has become incorporated into the discourse about reflective teaching. Many teacher educators, no matter what their educational orientation, have jumped on the bandwagon at this point, and have committed their energies to furthering some version of reflective teaching practice. According to Calderhead (1989):

Reflective teaching has been justified on grounds ranging from moral responsibility to technical effectiveness, and reflection has been incorporated into teacher education courses as divergent as those employing a behavioral skills approach, in which reflection is viewed as a means to the achievement of certain prescribed practices, to those committed to a critical science approach in which reflection is seen as a means toward emancipation and professional autonomy. (p. 43)

We are not interested in encouraging you to jump on any bandwagon. Although we believe the reflective teaching movement is a powerful and valuable one, it is not without its problems. One of the central problems has to do with the vagueness and ambiguity of the term, and with a misunderstanding of what is entailed in reflective teaching. Is any thinking about teaching that teachers do reflective teaching? Is any action a teacher takes supportable, just because they have thought about it in some systematic way? We would answer no to both of these questions and will enunciate our fears about the dangers posed by the reflective teaching movement throughout this book. Having initially drawn some distinctions between the teacher as reflective practitioner and the teacher as technician and having identified five key features of reflective teaching, we now elaborate further on what we believe is entailed in a useful and powerful approach to reflective teaching.